

# MISSOURI STATE PARKS

Scott Joplin House State Historic Site

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## THE KING OF RAGTIME

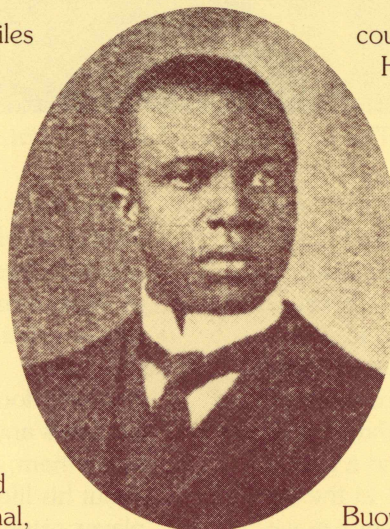
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"... he left his mark on American music."

John Stark, Joplin's friend and publisher

Scott Joplin was born to Jiles and Florence Joplin in Texarkana, Tex., in November 1868. He exhibited musical talent at an early age, and although impoverished, Joplin's parents insisted that their son study classical piano. By age 11, this child prodigy was able to play several musical instruments, and compose and improvise his own music. Mastering both the formal structure of classical music and the free-flowing, improvisational, artistic expression of black musicians from the minstrel tradition, Joplin eventually became the leading exponent of a new, syncopated musical genre. He became "The King of Ragtime."

Traveling throughout the Midwest, Scott Joplin plied his musical trade in railroad towns and riverfront cities; his audiences were largely patrons of saloons, brothels and skid row restaurants. But, his musical reputation soon transcended black audiences and backroom venues and captured the listening ear of the middle class white community as well. Sometime during this transient period, he established roots in Sedalia, Mo., where he completed a degree in music at the George R. Smith College for Negroes. Joplin also began



courting his future wife, Belle Hayden. While in Sedalia, his experimentation with intricate musical rhythms led him to create his first well-known published work, the *Maple Leaf Rag*. In an era before radio, MTV, or CD players, *Maple Leaf Rag* became a national sensation in the form of sheet music, printed by Joplin's Sedalia publisher and friend, John Stark.

Buoyed by the success of *Maple Leaf Rag* and a growing national reputation, Joplin moved to St. Louis in the spring of 1900 with his new wife, Belle. They moved into the flat at 2658A Morgan Street, now Delmar Boulevard, and while living there between 1900-1903, he produced some of his better known compositions: *The Entertainer*, *Elite Syncopations*, *March Majestic*, and *Ragtime Dance*. With royalties coming in from his musical creations, he began to perform less and became more of a teacher and composer. He was a friend to many other St. Louis musicians, including Tom Turpin (owner of the Rosebud Cafe, where Joplin sometimes played the piano) and Louis Chauvin with whom he composed *Heliotrope Bouquet*. During this productive time in St. Louis, Joplin also wrote his



first, major serious composition, an operatic piece called *A Guest of Honor*, which had as its setting the Missouri governor's mansion in Jefferson City. The original score for this work was lost, and it can no longer be performed.



*The front parlor of Joplin's flat.*

In 1907, Joplin moved to New York, and what he hoped would be increased national recognition and further success. But fame and good times share a common bond — they are both fleeting and so it was with Scott Joplin. Following the financial failure of the most ambitious work of his life — his opera *Treemonisha* — and weakened by a broken spirit and a fatal disease, he died April 1, 1917, at the age of 49. He was buried in a pauper's grave that remained unmarked until 1974.

Most people were already familiar with Negro spirituals and African-American contributions to jazz, but few were aware that the musical genre "ragtime" was also a product of black innovation, until ragtime enjoyed a renaissance in the early 1970s. A motion picture, *The Sting*, used as its theme music, *The Entertainer*, one of Scott Joplin's most popular pieces, and today ragtime remains a somewhat muted but permanent part of the American musical scene.

In 1976, Scott Joplin's St. Louis home was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1984, the owner, Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., donated the property to the Department of Natural Resources' Division of State

Parks. Scott Joplin House now has the distinction of being the only state historic site dedicated wholly to the presentation of African-American contributions to Missouri's cultural history.

The first floor visitor center exhibits depict St. Louis and the neighborhood as Joplin knew them, and provide additional details about his life and work. The operating player piano in the music room allows visitors to listen to piano rolls of the ragtime era, including some that were cut by Joplin himself.

Not many authentic details of Joplin's life at 2658A Delmar are known today. It is certain that his financial success was only just beginning when he lived here, so the second floor flat he and Belle occupied has been furnished unpretentiously, in turn-of-the-century style. Gas lights, calimine paint and second-hand furnishings re-create the modest beginnings of Joplin's St. Louis years.

